DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 037 468 TE 001 785

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TITLE Using Children's Novels as Starting-Points for Discussions.
PUB DATE 69
NOTE 4p.; Published by Chatto and Windus, London.
JOURNAL CIT Use of English; v20 n3 p228-30, 238 Spr 1969

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.30
DESCRIPTORS Adolescence, Childhood Attitudes, *Childrens Books, *English Instruction, Ethical Instruction, *Ethical Values, *Fiction, *Moral Issues, Moral Values, Novels

ABSTRACT

The specific questions of behavior and morality confronting today's youth are depicted in many novels which present situations involving the problems, anxieties, and questions relevant to growing children and adolescents. General social problems, such as youth gangs, interracial friendships, and illegitimate pregnancy, as well as unique personal problems, are explored fictionally. Many of the books, much more imaginative than "case studies," provide fascinating reading, bases for stimulating discussions, or externalization of some problems too personal for group discussion. (Nineteen novels, mostly British, suitable for starting discussions are mentioned or discussed in the article.) (JM)

The Use of English; Vol. 20, No. 3, Spring 1969

ED037468

USING CHILDREN'S NOVELS AS STARTING-POINTS FOR DISCUSSIONS

by

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THE PROBLEM of moral and ethical education is always before us. The children we teach feel the need for guidance—mostly an unexpressed need—on all kinds of questions from the trivialities of social behaviour to the fundamental questions, 'What kind of a person am I?' or 'What kind of society am I growing up in?' Any teacher who has encouraged free discussion will have some measure of the anxieties, the uncertainties, which beset the growing child, and will have realised the need to help. We can trace this search for help, too, in a context removed from school—all women's magazines have their 'help' page, and these pages have an eager readership. It is, of course, sometimes easier for those in need of help to seek it from an unfamiliar person, but it may well be the familiar and well-known teacher who recognises that a problem exists, or who wants to forestall the problem situation by awakening certain lines of thought in children.

In such a situation, some modern works of fiction for children discuss some of the questions of behaviour and morality which are puzzling to the children of today's world. We have moved a long way from the moral story of earlier writers for children, but many of the more worth-while authors writing children's stories today are obviously informed with a concern for their audience, and a desire to help them through the difficult job of growing up.

Children are aware of others who are 'different', and the problem of how to treat them, how to avoid the primitive reaction of cruelty which such differences can all too easily arouse, has attracted the attention of a number of authors. Alice Lunt has written a charming story, *Eileen of Redstone Farm* (Dent, 1964), which has as its theme the rescue of a young girl from a cruel stepmother and her adoption into a happy, normal family life. Teachers will be interested in the way in which the story is developed to show that children need time to adjust to new surroundings—even to much happier ones—and that patience and continuing help is needed.

Another child who is 'different' because he is the product of a bad environment is Butch, the hero of Reginald Maddock's *The Pit* (Collins, 1966).

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The child of a shiftless, drunken father, Butch develops an antagonism to schools because he has no chance of conforming to the standards set, and, of necessity, becomes tough and far too ready to try to fight his way out of any trouble. The help and support provided by a sheep-farmer and his shepherd give the promise of a happy ending. One defect of this book is that the author has chosen to write in the first person and so Butch has to be shown as far more articulate than he could be—but this will be a defect more apparent to adults than to the children who enjoy the story.

John Rowe Townsend has taken the problem of a poor family environment even further in his two books, *Gumble's Yard* (Hutchinson, 1961) and *Widdershins Crescent* (Hutchinson, 1965), in which he deals with a slum family. He even dares to make the adults a father and 'aunty', a shiftless pair cohabiting, and depicts the older children battling against the slum environment of which they are prisoners.

The problem of physical handicap is the theme of Vera Robinson's *David in Silence* (André Deutsch, 1965). David has been deaf since birth and, in consequence, has enormous difficulties of communication. Miss Robinson explores the problems which beset an ordinary, hearing boy who tries to make friends with David, and of gang violence as a reaction to a situation which children do not understand, and so fear.

These books are all attempts to enlist the sympathy and understanding of children for others with particular problems and difficulties. It is interesting to come across a book which contains a warning against interfering too thoughtlessly in other people's lives. Joseph Krumgold's *Onion John*, an American story, published in this country by Lutterworth (1964), is in part a study of a father-son relationship, but it also makes a point against the unthinking charity which expects the recipient to accept whatever is given, and to conform to the standards of the donors. Surely a useful warning in these days when so many attempts are made to enlist children's help for the under-privileged?

On a more personal note, there are studies of individual development, particularly of adolescence. Jean MacGibbon in *Liz* (Hamish Hamilton, 1966) attempts to show the rapid changes of mood of adolescents, and touches on the problem of teen-age violence. This is also the theme of another book by John Rowe Townsend, *The Hallersage Sound* (Hutchinson, 1966).

H. F. Brinsmead's *Pastures of the Blue Crane* (O.U.P., 1964) is another story of an adolescent growing up. This time the theme shows how a young girl, abandoned in every way except financially and brought up in boarding schools, finds family and friends. Adults will realise that the troubles of such an adolescent would not be so easily resolved, but to the young reader, the story, with the attraction of its Australian setting, would give food for thought.

We hear of 'the gap between the generations', and many teachers may find it helpful to have to hand some books which deal fairly and constructively with the theme of adolescent rebellion against the family. *The 'Bus Girls* by Mary Harris (Faber, 1965) is just such a book, so also are Margaret Storey's *Pauline* (Faber, 1965); John Walsh's *The House in the Cedar Tree* (Heinemann, 1966) and Barbara Willard's *Charity at Home* (Constable, 1965). This last book also deals with the fantasies of an adopted child, a theme worked out even more fully in Mary Harris' *Seraphina* (Faber, 1960). Seraphina, a child who finds her world too difficult and unsympathetic, creates in compensation fantasies about the mother she has never known. Children will learn something of the temptations and dangers of a retreat from reality, and will appreciate how this difficulty, and other difficulties also, can be helped by the realisation that other children, too, have difficult backgrounds, and can be overcome with the sympathetic support of adults. The book is the more valuable for its portrayal of an understanding headmistress.

There are, too, the problems of the world outside school—and, in a flood of 'career' books, it is encouraging to find a realistic story about growing up and finding a job. *Matty Doolin*, by Catherine Cookson (Macdonald, 1965), is the tale of a boy who longed to break away from the dockland town and the labouring job which appeared to be his fate. A holiday adventure gives him the chance of a job he wants, a demanding job at a realistic wage—there is no 'golden future', or effortless success, which are false allures to hold out to children.

Authors are tackling some of the major social problems, too. Eric Allen wrote a 'gang' story for younger children, *The Latchkey Children* (O.U.P., 1963), about a group of children fighting to keep their playground as they want it. The book includes good pictures of children making friends, especially across the barrier of colour. Janet McNeill has written another story of children's play in *The Battle of St. George Without* (Faber, 1966), and this, too, gives a picture of a mixed community, children and adults. Josephine Kamm has attempted the more difficult theme of adolescent boy-girl friendship across the colour bar in *Out of Step* (Brockhampton Press, 1962). The book is a plea for tolerance, while making the point that peoples' views rarely change suddenly. *The Pastures of the Blue Crane* is also in part about colour prejudice.

Another problem relevant to many young people today is that of illegitimate pregnancy, and Josephine Kamm has written of this in *The Young Mother* (Brockhampton Press, 1965). The books deals with externals rather than the emotions, but is a sensible statement of the problems inherent in the situation.

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Taken generally, as school library stock, these books offer fascinating stories, which are far more than escapist literature. As starting points for discussions, they give the teacher some worth-while material. We are becoming familiar with 'case studies', problem situations with some personal details, expounded as a basis for study and argument, but teachers may find that younger children are helped by the creative power of the novelist's imagination. The more fully realised the characters, the more gripping the plot, the more easily is the child's attention caught, his sympathy aroused, and his imagination, in turn, awakened. Moreover, the fictional situation provides a useful externalisation for some problems which children may only be able to formulate in terms which are too personal for group discussion.

The books mentioned above are not, of course, a closed collection—only a few suggestions which teachers may find helpful.